Valley to Mountain and Back
Luke 9:28-43
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An interesting psychological phenomenon attaches itself to the experience of height for most of us. Discounting the condition called vertigo, and the fear some people feel, the norm seems to be a certain fascination with heights: a reflectiveness and peace that mysteriously comes over us when we are given the vantage point of height. I count myself in that number. I have never lost the thrill of flight: I have never been able to give total attention to a book while riding on an airplane because I like to see what's going on below. Having small children provides me with an excuse for making pilgrimages to the observation areas in the John Hancock Building or the Empire State Building and now, happily we live in a community that affords opportunity for periodic ascents.

I was born and raised in the mountains of Pennsylvania. I love to drive through them and look down from them.

There are simple, logical reasons for the experience which I am assuming is shared in some form by most of you. An airplane flight, an excursion to an observation tower, a trip to the mountain literally lifts us up and away from reality. From the vantage point of 25,000 feet one can see the whole: farm adjoining farm, stream meandering through the fields: from the Hancock Building the worst Chicago slums appear neat and clean and well ordered. The air is clear and it's quiet on the mountain top. It's a good experience, occasionally, to go up and look down - for logical, simple reasons. But also for more complex reasons.

Historically, men have attached deep religious significance to heights. Recall, for instance, the importance of mountains in the Old Testament: Mt. Sinai: Mt. Horeb: Mt. Hermon. The mountain is the place where God comes down to meet man. Mt. Zion is where the kingdom of God will first be established among men.

Mircea Eliade, one of the foremost students of ancient religions, has observed that "The great mythological themes continue to repeat themselves in the obscure depths of the psyche....It seems that a myth itself, as well as the symbols it brings into play, never quite disappears from the world of the psyche; it only changes its aspect and disguises its operations". (Myths, Dreams and Mysteries; cited by Harvey Cox, The Seduction of the Spirit, p.280.)

And so, I would submit, that at least part of what is happening to us as we experience the mystique of height is related to what men have always experienced on the mountain top since the beginning of time. At least it's an intriguing possibility.

But, as the professor suggested, the ancient myth comes in contemporary disguise. We may not make periodic pilgrimages to the mountain; the form in which the ancient mythological theme is disguised today is what are euphemistically called "mountain-top-experiences". Martin Luther King, in his very famous Washington speech, said that he had "been to the mountain", and everyone knew what he meant. A religious conversion is often referred to as a "mountain-top" experience. A rare moment of pure joy or revelation or love is a trip to the mountain. The day we were married - for me the day of ordination, or more immediately, the day of installation last Sunday - are trips to the mountain. A week-end retreat or family vacation can serve the same purpose - removing us from the immediacy of life, providing a place from which to see the whole, an interlude of peace and reflection when, for a moment, everything falls into place.

The thesis of this sermon is that life consists of a rythmic movement: valley to mountain and back; literally for ancient man - symbolically for us. The antithesis, the temptation, however, is to get stuck on the mountain: to make the mountain-top experience the norm: to measure all of life by those rare moments of pure pleasure, revelation, clarity - whatever; and to live out one's years in a quiet frustration because the reality of the valley keeps pulling us down. Consider first the text: a story that portrays that rhythm of life in a dramatic way....

The incident occurs in all three Synoptic Gospels. It is called the "Transfiguration". Three followers of Jesus saw him in a new way through the experience. As they looked back on it years later, they realized that it was a moment of God-given revelation, a turning point in their understanding of Jesus.

He had taken Peter, James and John, apparently the inner-circle of the disciples, up on a mountain to pray. Up, that is to say - in the idiom of Israel, to the place where God meets man. And there they were given a vision: - "Heavy with sleep", Luke notes, their vision included two men out of the past: Moses and Elijah. The final words of the Old Testament invoke their names: "Remember the law of my servant Moses. Behold I will send you Elijah the prophet before the great and terrible day of the Lord comes." (Malachi 4:4-5).

Moses, the law-giver: Elijah - the prophet exemplary: there were no higher authorities. The point is that when - on a mountain - they appear, the day of the Lord - the Messianic Age - has arrived.

Peter was inspired....overwhelmed, as any Jew would be. "Master, let us make three booths: one for you, one for Moses and one for Elijah." That, by the way, is exactly what God had told Moses to do after their encounter on Mt. Sinai. Build a sanctuary for God to reside among his people. That's what the Tabernacle was - a portable sanctuary, carried ahead of the people during the years of Wilderness Wandering, erected at each new camp site by the Levitical priests. So, Peter, was not exactly talking off the top of his head. There was strong historic precedent for his suggestion, with one significant exception. Moses didn't build the Tabernacle on the mountain. He built it in the valley where the people were. He built it for portability. The theology of the Old Testament shifts dramatically with that idea. God "tabernacles" with his people - he goes with them - he later becomes "incarnate" in Jesus Christ. He does not stay on the mountain.

Peter, that is to say, had his geography confused. And Luke apologizes for Peter's faux pas by adding the parenthetical observation: "He spoke without knowing what he was saying."

Peter may have been expressing a very normal, human desire in his suggestion: The desire to prolong a most rewarding experience, to preserve that one beautiful moment he had been given by building something to memorialize it. I can understand Peter at that moment. I can understand his intuitive knowledge that it's one thing to be a disciple in the clear pure air of the mountain, but it's an altogether different matter to be a disciple in the valley, where Jesus did things like breaking the law and insulting the Scribes and eating with Gentiles.

Jesus did not even acknowledge Peter's suggestion. Instead, he came down from the mountain - down to a crowd of people waiting, pushing, down to the desperate father of a very sick little boy, down to the ineffective faith of his disciples; down, that is to say, into the ambiguous reality of life - where it is lived.

The Word of God in that text - in that sequence of events is, I would submit, painfully clear. I invite you to think about it with me in terms of our culture - our church - and our personal experience of Christian Faith.

It has been suggested that the two most powerful ideas alive in our culture today - ideas with heavy religious overtones - are that the good life is the life of instant gratification: and, secondly, that the good life can only be experienced by recapturing the past. The two, gratification and nostalgia, have become symbols of the "mountain-top" in our day. One evening in front of a television set will document the power and popularity of those ideas. Commercials present the ideas antiphonally: this lipstick or deodorant will make you instantaneously irresistible, and thus introduce you to the world of pleasure and gratification. Men will walk into trees - women will fall off their chairs if you quaff this diet drink or wear these slacks. Madison Avenue knows where the mountain is! Or - brush your teeth with this chemical compound because it will taste just like things used to taste when life was simpler, quieter.

In a delightful passage in a recent book, Harvey Cox cites a New York Times Ad for Air France that implores:

> "Abandon the ordinary...Let yourself go. Embrace the uninhibited...Total involvement is up to you. Escape unlimited involves you in everything... or nothing."

And then comments; "The ad goes on to promise companionship with fellow 'bon amis' - lovers of the free and uninhibited life - young in spirit. The picture shows a generously endowed woman frisking in the surf with a less clearly seen man... Insulation from instrusion is guaranteed by the island's isolation. Whereas in this 'vale of tears' we lurch between deep loneliness and bothersome interruptions, there we will experience both perfect community and perfect privacy. No revivalist hymn ever promised more. Sweet Beulah Land!" (ob. cite. p. 288).

Or consider the power of the idea - that I'm convinced will be known as the marketing coup d'etat of the century - the Playboy philosophy: The highly successful idea that the good life - real life, is defined in terms of good music, good food, good clothes, good cars, good booze, and of course, good and compliant women. The word is instant and constant gratification. The magazine that markets the idea, zealously avoids anything that might even hint at the reality of life as most of us live it or see it. There are no families in Playboy: no children, few marriages, no alcoholics, no junkies, no ghettoes, no broken lives, no guilt, no unemployment - nothing to diminish the idea that real life can be lived on the mountain-top.

I would suggest that our culture, and you and I as we participate in that culture, have been sold a lie: and that the toll is very heavy in terms of frustration and emptiness. Because life is lived - for all of us - mainly in the valley.

Let's apply the word to the Church. The apocryphal story is told of two meetings held simultaneously in Leningrad early in this century. At the first meeting the hierarchy of the Russian Church were discussing, at great length, a proposed change in the color of vestments to be worn by priests. At the second meeting a small group of dedicated Marxists were plotting to take over the world. Too often in our long history the Church has done its best to preserve that which is high and holy at the expense of following its Lord into the valley of human need.

Consider, for instance, the outcome of those two Leningrad meetings and the current state of their respective projects ....or consider the great cathedrals of Europe. Monuments to craftsmanship, symbols of beauty and soaring hope without which our civilization would be immeasurably poorer. Memorials to a moment in history when Christianity was all. But all too often those cathedrals were built in the midst of grinding poverty, cruelty and oppression. I love to visit them - but I cannot rid myself of the possibility that they are filled today - not with vital congregations of courageous believers - but with gawking American tourists - as a result of the honest judgement of an honest and just God.

The Church has, all too frequently, constructed its booths on the mountain-top -- not only in Europe. Urban America is studded with empty churches: empty memorials to a great moment in time: when Christianity was popular and prominent in the city. Langdon Gilkey compares the situation to those old German villages dominated by a castle built high above. In the middle ages the village was governed from there: commerce transpired there. People of importance went there. But today only sight seers pay attention to the castle: the only commerce is in post cards and souvenirs. Real life goes on down below - almost as if the castle no longer exists. In city after city that is what has happened to the Institutional Church.

This congregation has, in the past, decided to swim against that current. We have decided to stay here and we have made our commitment to the reality of life in the valley as it is lived here. I would presume to suggest that God's word to us is clear. Our continuing task, as a church, is not to dawdle on the mountain: but to keep following our Lord into the valley of human need: to understand very clearly that we cannot imprison God in our sanctuary - our traditions of past greatness - to see him always out in front of us - calling us forward, leading us out and down into the valley.

The word is personal also. Purveyors of popular religion have been quick to understand the power of the two ideas I mentioned earlier - instant gratification and nostalgia. As a result a lot of what goes on under the name of Christianity appeals to the need to turn back the clock - there is immense appeal in the simple idea of old-time religion - or offers a Gospel that promises instant spiritual gratification and a life of faith lived on the mountain top every minute of every day.

I would guess that there is no one here who does not wish for that....for some clear, concise experience of Jesus Christ: some continuing assurance that we are right - that he is Lord - and that all will be well. I would guess that nearly all of us experience occasional doubt - and have feelings of envy and inadequacy when we encounter someone whose personal experience of Jesus Christ seems always to be bubbling with certainty and enthusiasm. I would guess that nearly all of us wonder at times what it must be like to be on the mountain-top of faith.

If my guesses about you are correct I would have you understand very clearly what the New Testament is saying in the story of the Transfiguration. The experience of Peter, James and John did not begin on the mountain-top. Their decision to become disciples, to follow Jesus, was not - as I read the accounts, a soul-shattering, emotional upheaval. Rather it began, for them, with that first tentative step of following - then another and another: following a Lord they did not fully know or fully understand. Peter, James and John were taken to the mountain to have their faith confirmed - after they had followed Jesus Christ in the valley of human need.

They had worked and served and healed and helped: and this glorious experience was given to them as an interlude. When Peter suggested that the mountain-top experience was the norm, that they build a memorial - preserve their experience, Jesus didn't even respond. Or rather, his response was in taking them down from the mountain and into a crowd of waiting people.

Frederick Buechner writes: "Who is this who asks us to follow? We want to know who he is before we follow him - and that is understandable enough except that the truth of the matter is that it is only by first following him that we can begin to find out who he is."

The Christian life for Peter, James and John was largely a matter of following Jesus Christ into situations that did not look or feel very religious: situations that were common and often ambiguous and sometimes controversial.

You and I, as a congregation of Christian people and as individuals are called to follow Jesus Christ in the valley of our own lives. For most of us, most of the time, it will not be a very spectacular setting. Rather, it will be the school, the P.T.A., the family with which we share life, the office or factory where we work, the marriage, the committees.

That is where Jesus Christ bids us to follow and serve and help and heal. That is where the creative, life-giving spirit of God will be found.

And then one day, in God's good time, we will be invited to the mountain, perhaps only for a fleeting moment. It will come - a rich and clear moment of truth. And then, just as surely, our Lord will call us back down - down to the valley where we and all of God's children live and move and have being: into the valley where Jesus Christ precedes us, leading - bidding us to follow.

Amen.